

I am currently piloting a Writer's Workshop model in my classroom. In this model, students are required to write daily, both short pieces and long essays that take weeks or months to fully complete. Mentor texts are used, and daily mini-lessons on skills both teach proper reading techniques and offer examples of how students should work to improve their writing. Although many students do well on assessments of skills, I do not see students actively using their new knowledge to improve their writing, and instruction seems compartmentalized. One of my classes has a diverse sample of writers, some of whom need much more instruction than others. While speaking to my mentor and to the 9th grade Reading Interventionist, I was reminded that I can assign different texts to students, and I can also use varied levels of mentor texts. As I generally assign the same text to each student, I believe it will be challenging, but ultimately productive and useful for my students if I assign texts differentiated by Lexile levels. My current practice also includes assigning an essay, handing out a rubric and expecting students to incorporate skills taught in mini lessons into their essays. I spend a great deal of time reading and providing feedback on my students' drafts and they have admitted to rarely looking at either the rubric or my comments when writing and revising. Ideally, students would use both of those as tools to guide them as they edit and revise.

I began planning for this module immediately after grading my students' first essay. When reflecting on their work I found that although a majority of my students completed their essays, some had not made any revisions, despite having ample time in class to do so. Piloting Writer's Workshop has proven to be a challenge for me, and although I conferenced with students and offered mentor texts coupled with teacher examples, my students did little more than scan their rough drafts for repetitive words before turning them in as final essays. I voiced my concerns in my 9th grade PLC meeting and found that I am not the only teacher with this issue. Students, overall, are not spending enough time on their first drafts, and there is little to no revision. I needed to incorporate better strategies to help students become more interested in their essay topics and motivated to not only reflect upon my suggestions for improvement but also to take it upon themselves to revise and assess their own progress.

Although many of my students' papers would have benefitted from a third revision, I realized that between planning and trying to stay current with my curriculum, it would be difficult to fit in a third draft. As we neared vacation I also came to the realization that if most students were not actively revising (or writing) first drafts of papers during class time, then those same students were likely not going to work on them over vacation. As I began to plan I realized that I needed to make some drastic changes to the way I structured my writing lessons, how I graded assignments and what my ultimate goals were for the next paper. While reading Linn and Gronlund's *Measurement and Assessment in Teaching*, I studied a simplified instructional model and decided to follow this model as I planned. Figure 1.2 advises teachers to "Identify

instructional goals, pre-assess learners' needs, provide relevant instruction and assess intended outcomes" (Linn, 11). The application of this model would serve two major purposes. First, my goal would be very clear from the outset, making my teaching practice very focused on the intended outcomes. Second, pre-assessing my students' needs on this particular assignment would be beneficial, as I could differentiate mentor texts and note who had difficulty from the beginning stages. I believed that this new learning would be a positive foundation on which to build my next unit.

Another table that I found interesting and helpful was one that detailed the comparative advantages of objective tests and performance assessments. Specifically, I was interested in the statement "If time pressure is a factor, poor writing habits may be developed" (Linn, 130). After pondering this statement, I learned that I wholeheartedly agreed. Too often I have complained that the firm deadlines I impose lead some students to write shoddy drafts quite hurriedly. The basic formula of brainstorming, writing a first draft, reading teacher comments and revising to turn in a final copy does not work with approximately 55% of my students. Out of my 112 students, 52 of the students are in Honors level courses and the other 60 are in the college preparatory sections. Forty-one of my Honors students turned in revised papers - the remaining eleven did not revise at all. And only nine out of sixty of my college prep students revised their papers based on my comments and suggestions. I believe that I gave my students ample time to write the papers, but throughout the process they were not held accountable and graded for pieces of it. They were graded on the whole, which led to some students wasting time and writing their draft quickly. Then, when it came time to revise, they had little time, or even inclination, to make the changes necessary to raise their grades. How could I possibly change the mindset of my students? I have tried many times, but to no avail.

When seeking to find an answer to this question, I learned about a perspective I had not considered. In his book *Assessing Student Performance*, Grant P. Wiggins addresses the issue of student motivation. According to Wiggins, students need an incentive to work harder and better. The incentive can vary from student to student, but he recounts a story about a cross country runner whom he coached. She was one of the slowest runners on her team, but ran for four years because it gave her great satisfaction to see her times go down on each race she ran (Wiggins, 142). After reading this chapter, I began to see the correlation between incentive and Writers' Workshop. My students should be offered incentives to revise their work, and this could be done through the short conferences described in the workshop overview. Students in today's society are accustomed to instant gratification. This need for instant gratification does not stop when they enter school. Countless times in my short teaching career I have been asked "Did you grade the papers yet?" "What is my grade NOW, Miss?" Only after reading this story did I truly start to understand how workshopping could have a valuable impact not only my students' learning, but also on me, as a teacher.

Slowly my unit has begun to come together. My writing goals are lofty, but clear: 100% of students will complete their essays, 100% of students will revise at least their thesis statement, one body paragraph and their conclusion. My goal for reading is for 100% of my students to

take relevant information from the text and apply it in other areas, such as their essays. As far as my learners' needs go, my students have already read two novels and completed an essay so I have been able to pre-assess their reading and writing levels. Therefore, I will be able to incorporate this data into my planning and effectively use strategies appropriate to individual students' needs. The focus areas for Freshman on the writing rubric are ideas and word choice. Because more than 50% of my college prep students scored below average in these two areas, I believe that it will be necessary to differentiate my mentor texts, as well as their reading assignments. I can schedule conferences to assess whether student learning is affected by the differentiated texts. I believe that not only will following this simplified instructional model impact my practice positively by keeping my lessons focused, but it will also provide a better student learning experience and help them remain engaged.

This quarter, the essential questions are "What makes something worth defending and protecting?" and "When is it important to take a stand?" For their major writing assignment, students will be assigned an argumentative essay. In conjunction with this, classes will read *To Kill A Mockingbird*. The three tie in quite well. I have valid concerns that some of my students will struggle with the novel and possibly give up on the reading before realizing the connections. Therefore, as a means of differentiation, I will have copies of the screenplay to the film version on hand. It is very important for students to make connections in this quarter, and providing students with a means to comprehend the story and analyze characters and events will lead to their engagement in class. I will then use class time to close read passages from the original novel, therefore ensuring that all students are being taught the same skills, and that all students are being exposed to and comprehending grade level appropriate literature. I expect that the use of leveled text will have a positive impact on student engagement in reading, which will lead to more dynamic classroom discussions. (Impact on student)

Students will have the freedom to choose their own topics for the argumentative essay, although I plan to spend a day brainstorming with the class. This will ensure that students are interested in their topics, which will increase the chances of students completing their essays. Once the topics are chosen I will begin conferencing. This is a drastic change from my previous practice, for I have always conferenced after the first draft, giving comments about the entire paper. In this unit, I will conference briefly about the topic, giving it its own grade. I will do the same upon completion of the thesis statement, introduction, one body paragraph and the conclusion. Each will receive a grade on its own. One of the major impacts on my practice conferencing will make is that it will allow me to monitor student progress, as well as frequently assess student learning. I also believe that grading the essays will be far less time consuming this way, as each piece of writing is short. Students will still need to come to conference with specific questions (I don't allow the "Is this good?" question in my classroom), and I can make comments as I feel necessary. Another change in practice will be immediate grading. I believe that this new practice might have the greatest impact on student performance. Upon conferencing with me, each student will receive his/her grade and it will be entered into the online gradebook immediately. They will also receive feedback on how to improve their grade based on either the ideas or word choice section of the writing rubric. This feeds the students' need for instant gratification, and

also gives them incentive to revise. Furthermore, the revisions will be based on student use of assessment criteria, which at this point is not utilized by many students. Upon completion of their revisions, they can schedule another conference, at which we will repeat the steps of questions, comments, grades and feedback. I anticipate that students will be quite motivated to 1) look at their rubrics, 2) pay attention to my comments and 3) revise their assignments, all once they see immediate results from doing so. This provides the incentive recommended by Wiggins and is a positive way to engage students in using assessment criteria to reflect upon and assess their own progress over time.

Writers' Workshop requires the use of mentor texts, and I will certainly use *To Kill a Mockingbird* as a mentor text. Atticus Finch's closing argument uses ethos, pathos and logos, all of which are important for students to use in their argumentative essays. I will also show them the film clip of this closing argument, as well as a clip from *A Time to Kill*. The films will be easier for some students to analyze than text. I will also, based on my conversation with our reading teacher and following Linn and Gronlund's advice, differentiate mentor texts (in the form of newspaper and magazine articles) in my classes by grouping students. Using the "I do, we do, you do" model, I will close read a mentor text looking first at the argument presented, evaluating its effectiveness and then grade both its idea and word choice using the rubric. I will follow these steps with the aid of the entire class, using a different text. Finally, I will group the students by reading and writing levels and assign them the same task to do together. I predict that once each group interacts with an appropriate level text, they will be able to transfer desired skills into their own essays. Often, especially in my large Honors classes, I assign the same text to students, varying only the page numbers they are to read. I have now learned that it will be better for me to find excerpts that share whatever quality I want my students to evaluate, whether it be style, voice, word choice or theme. I cannot expect a student with a 710 Lexile to emulate an argument from an article with a 1500 Lexile. Although I hope to eventually lead him there, I need to meet students on their own level and scaffold them higher. By changing this part of my practice, I can more easily, as Wiggins says, "provide models against which to check one's own performance rather quickly" (Wiggins, 140).

Finally, I will no longer impose a strong, inflexible due date for final essays. This is also a huge change in my practice, but, based on what I have learned in my readings and professional discussions, I now believe that many students likely waited until the last minute to write their essays, turning in examples of sub-par writing. This is not to say that students may have unlimited time on their essays, because of course grades need to be entered for report cards. However, if my due dates are flexible and I offer my students the opportunity to revise as many times as they'd like to for a better grade, then I believe it will impact student performance tremendously. Students will already see the benefit of conferencing, they will be empowered to make corrections and to raise their grades, and their final essays will only be final upon the end of the quarter in which they are due. For, after all, isn't my goal for all students to read the text incorporate what they've read into an essay, and revise the essay until it is as good as they can make it? Of course. I want to see mastery from my students. I want to see confidence in my students. I want to see my students empowered and knowledgeable, driven and successful.

Therefore, I will veer from my normal practice and accept all revisions that are presented within my grading due dates. I believe that students' grades will increase considerably, for, again, as Linn and Gronlund state, "If time pressure is a factor, poor writing habits may be developed." I look to alleviate that pressure and develop the skill of revision.

This module has been one of the most valuable for me. I have learned many new things, such as a simplified unit foundation, how to differentiate mentor texts, possible reasons why students turn in shoddy papers, a new means to motivate students and how I can use the workshop model to improve my practice and student performance. My practice has been impacted, for I now plan for shorter tasks and more conversations, I will completely change the manner in which I grade and I will become more flexible with due dates. And, most importantly, I anticipate a major impact on student engagement and performance, as this new unit includes new assessment strategies, new assessment criteria, new tools that are appropriate for individual needs and new incentives to motivate and engage students not only in the process of assessing their own work, but also in the process of reflecting upon (and acting upon) ways to improve it. I cannot wait for the next quarter to begin, so my students and I can embark on this new and improved journey through English 9.